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Osaka University

## Some Recollections of a Gobi Woman

Richard Zgusta

### 「ゴビ砂漠のある女性の回想」

リチャード・ズグスタ

南モンゴルのバヤン・ホンゴル州のボグド群はゴビ砂漠の中心であり、その住民を代表する生活様式は、季節的な遊牧移動である。この覚え書は、そこに住んでいるユンデンという70代の女性の、ゴビ地方の文化及び歴史的な事件に関する様々な思い出を紹介しています。

Tundev Yunden. Bayan Khongor. Bogd somon. <sup>(1)</sup>

I knew my parents only very little. When I was 9 years old, my father died and when I was 13, my mother also died, so I became an orphan when I still was a child. I had two sisters, an older and a younger one, and the three of us, all orphans, stayed in the same small yurt where we had earlier lived with our father and mother.

My father died during a long nomadic journey at the Sevrei mountain, which was on foreign land. While he was ill, he took medicine provided by local medicine men, but it did not help his recovery. The Sevrei mountain forms the border with the southern part of our native land. We travelled there at that time because of a drought in our land.

I remember very well that we moved with our livestock back from behind the Sevrei range at the beginning of summer, during very hot days. Before our return movement we spent the spring season behind that range where livestock was grazed the earliest in spring, to strengthen the animals. We travelled two days until we reached the border of our native land on the third day.

I vaguely remember that my father was buried somewhere behind the Sevrei range. He died a few days after *tsagaan sar* ('White Month') <sup>(2)</sup>. Following the local custom, my father's body was taken out of the yurt and kept in an *ovoodo* <sup>(3)</sup> for a few days. After that, we drove a few of our animals to a monastery called *Suvragiin Khuree*, the nearest monastery on the southern side of the Sevrei range, in order to hold a memorial service for him.

After our father's death, my older sister became the head of the household, <sup>(4)</sup> and we began to lead our nomadic lives constantly in the neighborhood with father's younger brother.

We had a fair number of livestock, including many sheep and goats, more than 30 yaks, about 10 camels and horses. Our uncle had adult sons who always helped us with various difficult tasks related to raising our livestock. His wife treated us very politely, we called her mother, she sewed new clothes and fixed torn ones for us and later served as a midwife during my younger sister's and my childbirths. Our uncle and his wife lived until they were over 80 years old.

\* My older sister married a young man from our area, and since that time her husband began to live with us in the same yurt. She gave birth to many children, but almost all died. Only one son remained alive. She died last year.

\* When I was over 20 years old, my younger sister got married and left our household to live with her husband. She was given a few heads of sheep and camels as a dowry. She did not have any children. She died before she turned 50. I was unable to attend her funeral due to the distance. Her husband is still alive.

\* When I was 20 years old, I gave birth to my first child, who was stillborn. When I was 21, I gave birth to a son who now lives not far from here. Later, when I was 25 years old, I gave birth to a daughter who died soon after her birth. At 27, I gave birth to my second son, and finally, at the age of 32, I gave birth to the only daughter that remained alive. In total, I delivered 5 children, counting both those who lived and who died.

\* My daughter was adopted by a family that I was very well acquainted with because they almost constantly moved around in our neighborhood. The man who adopted her soon died, but his wife remained alive. My daughter now has many children and lives in an independent household. Even today she keeps asking me why I have given her away to strangers. She says that at that time she was no longer a baby and could already walk. She keeps asking how come we were unable to feed our own daughter. At that time my daughter was ill for a long time, so I thought it would be better for her if she grows up in another family. A local fortuneteller advised that her fate would improve if she is given away to another household rather than staying with her mother at her native hearth where she does not feel very well.

\* Boys' first haircut ceremony takes place at an early age. My younger son's hair was cut when he was 3 years old and my older son's hair was cut at the age of 5. In our region, there was

a custom to cut children's hair on a specific date, that is the third day of the first summer month according to the lunar calendar. On this day people usually invite a person whose year of birth is auspicious to that of the child. This person sits in the seat of honor (khoimor)<sup>(5)</sup> of the yurt and is the first to cut a little tuft of hair of the boy. Then each of the persons who are present at the ceremony takes a turn to cut the boy's tuft of hair. The hair is cut with scissors, after which the boy's head is shaved with a special razor.

\* When my father got married for the second time, his wife was many years younger than he was. There was an interesting episode. One day, when he was very young, my father went to a yurt where many children lived. Their mother was about to give birth to another child, so she asked him to slaughter a ram so that there is enough fresh meat for the newborn child. He did as she asked and left. Many years later my father married the same newborn daughter whose mother asked him to slaughter a ram. At that time he did not know he was killing a ram for his future wife.

Before his second marriage he was married to a woman who was many years older than he was. They had no children, so his wife asked him to marry a young girl. After his second marriage, his old former wife lived together with them in the same yurt. The young wife carefully looked after her until her death.

After his second marriage, my father and his wife adopted a daughter and later their own two daughters appeared, that is, I and my younger sister. My older sister was an adopted child.

\* Since I was 9 years old, I began to pasture our own camels every day, and while I was on pastures, I learned how to spin various threads out of camel fleece. When I was 13, I learned how to braid strings made of fleece of various kinds of livestock. I kept looking after my camels until I was 19 when I gave birth to my first child.

\* We had about 30 yaks, but suddenly an infectious disease we call tsagaan uvgun (white elder) appeared and all the yaks died of it. This illness has disappeared after modern veterinary medicine was introduced to the rural areas.

\* My mother died together with her child during delivery. She fell ill since she became pregnant and her illness was gradually worsening. She took medicine provided by lamas and massage specialists (who were ordinary livestock breeders) were called, but her health did not improve. We buried her and immediately moved to another place. This was also a custom not

to linger too long at a place where a family member has died. After moving to another locality we gave some of our livestock and other items of our property to a lama in order to conduct benediction ceremony for my mother. Not very far from the place where we were at that time, which was inside our native region, there was a small monastery known as Noyon Khutagt which we had often visited. This is where the memorial service for our mother was held.

Following the local practice, after three years people usually return to the place where they have buried their relatives. In spring, when I looked after the sheep, I returned to the place where my mother my mother was buried. It was quite simple. I prayed for a while on the spot where my mother was lying, cried a little and went home.

We never use the word 'to bury' when childdren die, simply we say 'to lose'. In the case of small children's death, we did not bury them the way we did with adults but just dropped them while riding on a horse or a camel.

\* It is more difficult to look after camels then sheep or goats. It is necessary to drive them to the pasture earlier in the morning than other kinds of livestock and bring them back to the camp late in the evening. In my childhood, camels were often attacked by wolves, so they required daily attention. The people who looked after camels had no time to come home from the pasture for lunch, so they usually brought with them yogurt made of camel's or sheep's milk in a namag (a vessel made of skin).

\* When we met each other in the pasture, we talked or played various games. Using small stones we played games such as ger bariikh ('building a yurt'), chuluu taaltsakh ('stone divination') and buga tavikh ('driving a deer') . To play the last game, the players first drew a board on flat ground, which they divided into two parts, Khangay and Gobi. They placed 24 small stones called deer on this board, which they used to move against each other.

In summer when many yurts are buit near each other, we played the game shuur khayakh ('throwing white stick') in the evenings. Usually we played this game when flocks of sheep were dying of the illness we call tatalzuur ('jerking in convulsion').

Before the beginning of the game the players cooked all the meat of one of the sheep that has died of this disease. Then they put the meat on a large wooden trough and when the evening gets darker, they bring the meat on the spot of the game. The people who have gathered to play the game eat the prepared meat and then begin to play. All the players divide into two groups and one of the players throws somewhere a bone of one leg, cleared of meat, and all the players start looking for the bone in the darkness. If anyone finds it, he secretly passes it to a member of his

group who in turn passes it to another one, and once the bone is brought to the designated place, the winning group announces it to the rest. If anyone of the other group finds out that a member of the first group possesses the bone, he will chase him and try to grab the bone from him. Therefore, it was necessary to pass the bone quickly and secretly. In this way, we played until late night.

\* In my childhood, like other little girls, I had my hair tied into two plaits called *khukhul*. I wore these plaits until my first haircut. Girls' hair is usually cut for the first time during an even number of age: that is, at the age of 4 or 6. When girls reach the age of 15 or 16, they begin to grow their hair fully and when they turn 17 or 18, they tie their hair into one plait which becomes the symbol of maturity. They first grow their hair on the back side of their heads and then on the front side. When they reach the age of 17 or 18, girls' hair on the forehead side is divided in the middle, rounded on both sides of the forehead and tied at the back. This style is called *shankh*. When I gave birth to my first child, I still wore the single plait. Young girls wore various silver ornaments in their plaits. We wore elegant *toortsog* hats made of silk and felt of various colors.

\* When I was about 17 or 18 years old, I learned how to make shoes and 3 or 4 years later I could make a *deel* (Mongol coat). My uncle's wife taught me how to make various kinds of clothes. I do not make traditional shoes anymore, but I am still wearing them.

When I was 18 years old, I began to wear silver earrings and silver rings on both ring fingers.

\* When I was young, I visited a monastery where I saw several times a *tsam* (masked dance). The monastery was not very far from the area where we moved according to the seasons, so it was easy for me to go there. Lamas who were my paternal and maternal relatives lived there on a permanent basis. Luckily, they were not arrested in 1930's. *Tsam* was a religious ritual held during the autumn months. It was often attended by children whose parents lived near the monastery. It was held twice. During the first autumn month, 14 masked dancers participated while during the last autumn month, there were only 4 dancers.

A similar ritual masked dance was the *tsam kharaikh* ('jumping festival'), in which each participant put on his own distinct mask and a special costume. The dance was held in a small plaza in front of the main temple (*tsogchin*). At a monastery near our pastures such a dance was held with 108 masked dancers; however, I never had a chance to attend it.

\* I attended many monastery rituals until I was almost 20 years old when all the monasteries everywhere were closed down. In our region, many lamas and other people were arrested in 1930's. They even arrested elders of very advanced ages, who had been relieved of their official duties many years before. For example, in our region they arrested two elderly acquaintances of mine. They took them away on camels; they never returned, completely disappeared. All the lamas who had lived in the monastery, young and old, were arrested indiscriminately. Some of the younger lamas later returned from prisons, but most lamas disappeared forever. The first person of our monastery to be arrested was an old lama who was also a famous healer. The mass arrests began at the end of autumn and lasted until early spring. First they arrested all the residents of the monastery and then they began arresting those who had previously left the monastery and now lived with their families on pastures. They also searched the arrested lamas' relatives and confiscated all their property. Once, after our local monastery was closed down, I went there and saw that all the doors were open and all the things inside were broken and torn down.<sup>(6)</sup>

\* My family worshiped the goddesses Tsagaan Dari-ekh (White Goddess- Mother) and Nagoon Dari-ekh (Green Goddess- Mother). We worshiped them so they would treat us women respectfully and protect us in many ways. Lamas always suggested to different families which deities to worship, and after that they make images representing these deities, in the form of pictures or in other shapes. Later, a ritual was held to animate these images, after which they become family idols.

\* As in other families, in our family circle we held the ritual dallag avakha (evoking forrtune) during the middle summer month. For this occasion, we slaughtered a ram to treat the people who came to attend this ritual. We put a whole brisket of the ram into the fire as an offering. The main purpose of this ritual is to secure well- being for the people, livestock and property of the household, to prevent illness, to be blessed by fortune and so on. Every participant of this ritual holds milk product on both palms turned upward and rotates them according to te movement of the sun, uttering 3 times "khurai". The housewife generally holds a wooden pail filled with milk while her husband hold a vessel made of wood or hide, called dallagyn sav ('storage of fortune'). They do and say the same as everybody else.

\* In my area, I remember, we held the ritual ovoo takhilga (mountain worship). I attended once this ritual in my childhood. It was dedicated to the local mountain Gurvan Undur ('Three

Heights').

\* When people enter a monastery, first they pray at prayer boards in front of the monastery. Then they enter inside and again pray at different boards placed in front of every temple.

\* In our region, during the *tsagaan sar* ('white month') festival we made three different kinds of *boortsog* (liver cooked on butter) and put them on plates. One of them was a round *boortsog*, which was called *tsan*, another one was oval and was called *khavsai* and the third one, which had a bent from, was called *gar boortsog*.

I have never travelled outside my native region. Before my first childbirth, I attended several times rituals in our local monastery. I have never gone to see a *naadam* after the formation of the *somon* center.

\* When I was about 17 or 18 years old, I became friends with a young man. We talked about living together, but we did not succeed.

\* My two youngest children and my oldest son have two different fathers. The father of my youngest children was a widower with one child. Although he persuaded me to come to live with him, I was unable to leave my native region and therefore I could not lead a family life with him. He later married another woman with whom he had several children. Now he lives in Ulan Bator and I heard from my daughter that he has become a lama. She only met him last year; before that she had not known that her father lived in Ulan Bator.

\* Later I met another man in our region and eventually came with my children here to his place and became his wife.

\* These days I no longer pray every day in my yurt, but each morning and evening I bring offerings of tea for the local mountains, the Ursa Major and *Turyin Suld* (a state tutelary deity). Each time I chant memorized Tibetan phrases dedicated to mountains, stars and so on.

\* When I was slightly over 60 years old, my hair was cut and since then I have been called *chavgants* ('nun', old woman). For this haircut, the same tools were used as in children's haircut. The one who cut my hair first was a person whose year of birth was auspicious to



mine.<sup>(7)</sup> Until I was 17 or 18 years old, I was called okhin ('daughter, little girl') . After that I braided my hair into one plait and became called khuukhen ('girl'). After getting married, I received the title avgai ('wife') which I kept until my haircut and my new title chavgants.

\* When we were young, we received silk, hats, belts and shoes from Chinese traders in exchange with livestock and wool.

\* I gave birth to my three children in the right side of the entrance inside the yurt, in the kitchen space where a shelf with cooking utensils was located. I removed the shelf and there I gave birth kneeling on both knees. Following the custom, I spent three days and three nights on that spot. I could not stretch my legs while sleeping; I had to keep them constantly in a bent position. During these three days and nights I followed the custom of spinning thread using dried sinew.<sup>(8)</sup> It is believed that spinning thread in the period just after delivery will make the mother stronger.

Like every other woman in our area, I gave childbirth in this position: kneeling on both knees I was holding a lattice while leaning with both elbows against a basket turned upside down.

After three days, the placenta was buried exactly on the spot where the child was born and then we held the ritual of washing the newborn child. From this moment I was allowed to sleep in my bed again. The placenta was wrapped in pieces of clean cloth immediately after the delivery and kept for three days before burying it. After the delivery, the mother usually drinks small amounts of meat soup and eats meat with no fat, until then it was prohibited to eat and drink. To restore her energy, she drinks tea with no milk and no salt.

After the placenta was wrapped in pieces of clean cloth and buried, a small black stone surrounded by grains was placed on top of it. Grains express the hope that children will multiply. After burying the placenta, the ritual of washing the child was held on the spot where the placenta was buried and the stone and grains placed. For this occasion, the people cooked a broth made of cervical vertebrae of a ram, with which they later washed the child. One woman held the child while another one poured the broth over the child. After that, they washed the child with arshaan (holy water) provided by a lama. Lama must always be present at the ritual of washing the child. At the end of the ritual, the kitchen shelf is returned to its original place and a small feast is held for every person who has attended. Uuts (ram's rump) , which is considered to be the most honorable meal, is cooked. The best part, together with the ram's hide and various milk products, is given as a present to the woman that has acted as a midwife.

Names are given on the occasion of the washing ritual. My first child was named by a secular person, but my second one was named by an elderly lama.

\* After I met my late husband, I brought my children to him and we began to live in his own yurt. My older son was over 10 years old at that time. Later all my children got married. My older son married a woman who had 4 children and lived with her in her yurt. Their own son appeared later. My younger son got married earlier than my older son and now has 9 children. My daughter also got married and now has 6 daughters.

\* My late husband was 7 years older than I was. He died when he was 66 years old. He had been married before he married me, but he had no children except for an adopted child. His wife died and then he married me. He was quite skillful in many ways, he could read and write in both Mongol and Cyrillic alphabets very well. Once he worked as a trade agent in addition to livestock raising. When I married him, I brought all my belongings, such as clothes, furniture and livestock, with me.

\* In 1956 we joined a *negdel* (cooperative) and gave away almost all our animals. At that time people everywhere entered cooperatives, so we became members like everybody else. The cooperative entrusted us with livestock to keep us occupied.

\* At the end of 1970's I began to receive a pension. First I received 60 tugrugs, after a few years 80, later they added again some more and I began receiving 120 tugrugs and finally, after the financial changes in 1991 my pension increased to the present 240 tugrugs.

\* After joining the cooperative, we constantly looked after only sheep and goats. During several years we took care of more than 300 goats, and there were many difficulties with their parturition as well as shearing. My late husband did not always participate in the daily household and cooperative work. Only after my children began to live in separate households he began to pasture sheep and goats, both our own and belonging to the cooperative. After joining the cooperative, we always feared that would not be enough wool to fulfill the cooperative quotas or that the number of livestock would decrease. We had no shortages of goods since we joined the cooperative. The cooperative sold us livestock for reduced prices; in fact, we were quite well off. We were among those people who fulfilled various orders and quotas (meat, milk, wool etc.) by the assigned date. At that time, like in recent years, milking was not done

within the framework of the cooperative organization, that is, movement of many households in one locality, but we moved to pastures freely, processing milk products and handing them to the cooperative. After the formation of the cooperative, types of traditional food based on meat and milk did not decrease. We simply milked own and cooperative sheep and goats, processed various milk and meat products and ate them.

\* Formerly we had not eaten camel meat, but after joining the cooperative we got used to eating it. I do not eat camel meat anymore because of my age. Nowadays I prepare every year dried goat meat in order to eat it during the summer months. Last year (1990), 4 or 5 heads were slaughtered for me so I could dry and otherwise prepare it during the winter and spring seasons.

\* Now I live in a small yurt which was made just for me. I gave my old big yurt to my granddaughter (my daughter's daughter). Children of my younger son now look after me. Especially my daughter-in-law meticulously takes care of me. My younger son's children always come here, for example, one of them comes here every other day to bring me milk for tea.

\* I have 3000 tugrug on my savings account now. Before, when my husband was still alive, we jointly owned 6000 tugrug, but due to the reforms this money became invalid.

## Notes

1 These accounts were collected during the Gobi Project expedition in August, 1991. I wish to express my gratitude to the organizer of the expedition, Professor Masao Onuki, then a faculty member of Osaka University of Foreign Studies, and my co-researcher, Tseelin Ayuush of the National Museum of Mongolian History.

2 Tsagaan sar is an equivalent of New Year's Day and is one of the most important Mongol holidays. It is mainly held in February, but there is no permanently fixed date. This holiday is thought to herald the spring season. It is called "white" probably because that color symbolizes happiness as well as holiness among the Mongols. It consists of a series of rituals that are held during several days. First, preparations are made during the New Year's Eve (bituun). The preparations involve cleaning old clothes, taking new clothes out of boxes, breaking old things, such as bones, and symbolically discovering new items to replace the old ones, such as fresh meat, etc. this is followed by the ritual dallaga in which the female hearth guardian deity is worshipped. The tsagaan sar proper mainly involves relatives and neighbors visiting each other, exchanging gifts (mainly meat and milk products), and formally greeting each other (zolgokh), as well as praying and bringing offerings to the local guardian deity. The evening of this day is spent by

playing various games.

3 Ovoodoi is a samall conical stucture built of a few poles and covered with felt.

4 Female heads of households are very common in the Gobi area, and often they are associated with matrifocality; that is, a household consisting of a usually unmarried woman and her children, in which men play a marginal role.

5 Khoimor is the ritually purest part of the yurt space, located at the back, opposite the entrance which is considered the lowest part of the dwelling in ritual sense. Traditionally, khoimor has been dominated by a now- extinct Buddhist altar and a chest of drawers storing household documents and other valuables. Family pictures are generally displayed there. The seat is reserved for an elderly male high- ranking guest, such as a lama in the traditional period who has later been replaced by a Party cadre.

6 Contemporary Mongolian documents indicate that during the purges initiated by Marshal Khorloin Choibalsan in early 1930's, approximately 100,000 persons, predominantly lamas, were executed. The total population of Mongolia before the purges was around 700,000.

7 Mongols have a calendar based on a 12 year zodiac cvcle of the following order: rat ox tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, rooster, dog, pig. Mongols observed many omens and signs according to this calendar. Mongols believed that some animals are incompatible with others. For example, the year of the tiger is incompatible with the year of the ox, because the tiger is an animal that may eat the ox; therefore, a person born during the year of the tiger should not marry one born during the year of the ox.

8 Mongols dried sinew to make thread when they slaughtered a cow or an ox.

(1997. 5.12 受理)